

AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

## Tim Crane, The Objects of Thought

**This is a pre print version of the following article:**

*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1599906> since 2016-10-09T12:03:38Z

*Published version:*

DOI:10.1111/1746-8361.12137

*Terms of use:*

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)



# UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

***This is an author version of the contribution published on:***

*Dialectica 70 (2016), 245-252, DOI: 10.1111/1746-8361.12137*

***The definitive version is available at:***

*<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dltc.v70.2/issuetoc>*

Tim Crane, *The Objects of Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, xii + 182 pp., £ 27.50 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-968274-4

Crane's recent *The Objects of Thought* is a very ambitious book, for it wants to keep together the following apparently incompatible claims. On the one hand, there are intentional objects even if they do not exist, as phenomenology suggests and philosophers of a Meinongian brand have repeatedly stated. On the other hand, reality itself is made just of existent things, as realists of any sort maintain against Meinongians and ultrarealists in general (p. 3).

In order to show that the above incompatibility is merely apparent, Crane endorses some further theses. To begin with, in the first part of the book he defends a negative thesis: *pace* Quine, the truth of (irregimented) existential quantifications is *not* the mark of ontological commitment. An existential quantification concerning nonexistent objects may well be true even if we are not ontologically committed to such objects. In actual fact, nonexistent objects are for Crane just nonexistent *intentional* objects. For him, the issue of nonexistence indeed concerns either *error*, which is based on thoughts – sometimes, hallucinatory experiences – directed upon nonexistent objects, or *fiction*, which is based on intentional states of imagination again directed upon nonexistent objects, or even *mythology*, which is something between error and fiction (p. 15). Hence, an existential quantification concerning nonexistent intentional objects may again be true even if we are not ontologically committed to such objects. From an *ontological* point of view, the only items we have to be committed to are items that exist, as realists maintain. Hence, we are so committed just to *intentionalia* that exist. Yet it remains true that there are nonexistent objects, in particular nonexistent intentional objects. As phenomenology suggests, it is really the case that thoughts are about objects, independently of whether such objects exist, hence of whether we are ontologically committed to them. Both my thought of London and my thought of Sherlock Holmes are about objects, even though unlike London, Holmes does not exist, hence we are not ontologically committed to him. Thus, it is really the case that there are objects thoughts are about, even if such objects do not exist. Truly saying that an *intentionale* is an object of thought, Crane further remarks especially in chap. 4, is just to take phenomenology seriously. From a *metaphysical* point of view, he goes on to say, in its being thought an *intentionale* is *just* an object of thought. Put otherwise, its being thought does not assign to it any nature whatsoever; if an *intentionale* has a nature, the question of what its nature amounts to is independent of its being thought about. Once again, both London and Holmes are *intentionalia*, insofar as they are what one's thoughts are respectively about. Yet their being objects of one's thought does not assign any nature to them; rather, their particular, and different, natures are determined independently of the fact that they are thought of – London is a concrete entity, while Holmes is a fictional character.

Here it seems that the original problem merely multiplies. It is not only the case that there are intentional objects that do not exist, but it is also the case that, independently of their being thought, such objects have a nature, as well as many other features. As we have just seen, among the *intentionalia* that do not exist, there is Holmes. Moreover, independently of its being an *intentionale*, Holmes has a nature; namely, he is a fictional character. Besides, he has many other features as well: e.g., he is cleverer than any other detective, real detectives included, he is greatly admired by readers, and he is the most famous of Conan Doyle's literary creations. The same holds true of many other nonexistent *intentionalia*. Vulcan is a theoretical posit, it was postulated by the French astronomer

Leverrier in order to explain some astronomical phenomena, yet it does not exist. How can all these things be true if we are not ontologically committed to such objects?

Here, what in chap. 5 Crane calls *psychological reductionism* enters the stage. Even though all the above things are true, they are true in virtue of *real* truth-makers, namely facts that are made of existing objects, objects we are ontologically committed to. As to the above examples, such real truth-makers are representational facts, involving just existing subjects and existing representations. That Holmes is very famous is made true by the fact that many subjects mobilize Holmes-representations; that Vulcan is postulated by Leverrier is made true by the fact that there are certain representations by Leverrier in which he mobilized Vulcan's alleged features. Ultimately, says Crane in chap. 6, the last chapter of the book, it is in virtue of the fact that we approximately share such representations that all of us can think about the 'same' intentional object even if such an object does not exist, hence we are not ontologically committed to it (and speaking of 'sameness' is therefore somehow metaphorical). As he says in chap. 1, for a thought to be about an *intentionale* is not to entertain with it a real relation. Only intentional objects that exist, hence objects to which we are ontologically committed, are such that thoughts about them are really related to them, *refer* to them, in Crane's own wording (p. 9). Rather, for a thought to be about an *intentionale* basically means to have a representational structure in which that thought is endowed with a certain intentional *content*.

I am pretty much in favour of Crane's metaphysical conception of *intentionalia*, although, as I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Voltolini 2013), I do not think that existence yields the right line of divide between *intentionalia* to which we are ontologically committed and those to which we are not so committed. Crane argues that having a certain nature for an *intentionale* prompts ontological commitment to it only if that nature is an *existence-entailing* one. Although *qua* objects of thought they are on a par, we are ontologically committed to London but not to Holmes, for London's concreteness forces it to exist, while Holmes' fictionality has no similar import (pp. 62-68). Let me postpone for a moment the whole assessment of what kind of property existence really is for Crane. Crane's underlying thought seems to be that existence is the mark of ontological commitment insofar as, by being entailed by certain natures but not by others, it is a *heavy* property: it must be something that makes a difference – a *causal* difference – in the world. As he says, "non-existent objects have no causal powers" (p. 66). Yet such a heaviness hardly makes the divide between items we are ontologically committed to and items to which we are not so committed. For instance, numbers have no causal powers, yet we are ontologically committed to them. For a kind of object to be admitted in the overall ontological domain, its *indispensability* rather seems the right criterion to adopt. Yet such an indispensability may well have nothing to do with causality, as numbers – and perhaps fictional objects themselves – well show.

Independently of this point, I wonder whether Crane successfully defends his thesis that it is really true, yet noncommittal, that there are *intentionalia* that do not exist. To begin with, he has to acknowledge that in order for such a thesis to be true, "existence" cannot work as a second-level predicate. For, if in saying that there are *intentionalia* that do not exist, "exist" here meant the same as the existential quantifier, one could not but end up uttering a contradiction, namely that there are intentional objects that are such that there are no such objects – as Quineans typically object to Meinongians, who take that existential claim to be not only true but also ontologically committing to nonexistent items. (To be sure, one might take the second occurrence of the quantifier in that *dictum* as restricted to the *existents*. This would provide a non-contradictory reading of the *dictum*, yet it

would mean endorsing the Meinongian interpretation of it Crane dislikes. See later.) Thus, if Crane wishes such a thesis to express a truth, “exist” in it cannot but be a first-level predicate. As a matter of fact, Crane himself seems to favor one such reading. As he explicitly says: “I think that Evans, Mackie and others are right that we should treat ‘exist’ as a first-level predicate” (p. 34). Yet he seems to endorse that reading in the interpretation that Evans himself adopts, according to which the first-level property of *existence* that predicate expresses is a *universal* property of individuals (*ib.*). Indeed, according to him existence is a (pleonastic: see later) property of individuals that is possessed by whatever figures in the overall ontological domain (p. 75). Yet if this interpretation is correct, it can hardly be the case that the claim that there are *intentionalia* that do not exist is true, as Crane wishes. For, as he himself acknowledges, given his realist ontological picture what is really true is its contradictory. For him, “there are no nonexistent entities” (p. 5), that is, it is not the case that there are – in the existentially, or ontologically, relevant import that at least rarely existential sentences have, as he admits (p. 45) – entities that do not exist. Hence, it is not the case that – in such an import – there are intentional objects that do not exist either: “there is no special category of *entities* or *quasi-entities* or *pseudo-entities* called ‘intentional objects’ or ‘nonexistent objects’” (pp. 4-5). At any rate, moreover, he acknowledges that allowing a first-level reading to “exist” in which it expresses a universal property of individuals is not enough in order to rule out the standard, Quinean, view that links quantification and existence (p. 34). Thus, in order to save both the truth of the thesis that there are *intentionalia* that do not exist and the claim that “exist” is a first-level predicate, he cannot but end up holding that such a predicate expresses a *non-universal* first-level property. This is strongly suggested by the truth of the sentence “some characters in the Bible existed and some did not”, which for him has admittedly almost the same syntax as “some kings of England died violently and some did not” (p. 17). Yet if this is the case, one can hardly understand how his position may differ from the Meinongian one he dislikes. Meinongians precisely hold both that the thesis that there are *intentionalia* that do not exist is true and that “exist” in it is a first-level non-universal predicate. Yet they also ‘Quineanly’ maintain that the truth of the above thesis ontologically commits one to nonexistent *intentionalia*. (Incidentally, here one must not be led astray by notational concerns. It is true that, as Crane notes (p. 26), a Meinongian such as Priest believes that being is the same as existence. This belief indeed leads Priest to further holding that “there are *intentionalia* that do not exist” is false, since this sentence for him means “there *exist* intentional objects that do not exist”. Yet for Priest being, aka existence, is just a *non-universal* first-level property of individuals, for the overall ontological domain is made both of items that have being, aka existence, and of items that fail to have it. Hence, there is for him *another* quantified sentence, namely “Some intentional objects do not have being, aka do not exist”, which is indisputably true. Yet *pace* Crane (pp. 26-7), this sentence is for Priest ontologically committal. “Some” expresses for Priest *ontological* commitment *à la* Meinong, although it does not express *existential* commitment, if this simply means, commitment to the subdomain of items that have being, aka existence. So, Priest’s noneism is definitely not a good ally for Crane to appeal to in his defense of true quantified, yet ontologically noncommittal, sentences.)

Be that as it may, an analogous problem arises as to sentences whose singular terms seem to involve nonexistent *intentionalia*. Consider the examples implicitly quoted above: “Holmes is a fictional character”, “Holmes is cleverer than any other detective”, “Holmes is admired”, “Holmes is the most famous of Doyle’s literary creations”, “Vulcan is a theoretical posit”, “Vulcan was postulated by Leverrier”, and of course “Holmes does not exist” and “Vulcan does not exist”. For Crane, “Holmes” and “Vulcan” are non-referring singular terms. Yet, those sentences are true even if

we are not ontologically committed to the objects the thoughts underlying such sentences are about. A possible way of dealing with this delicate situation is to appeal to a (positive) free logics treatment of such sentences, as Crane himself positively considers (p. 57). Yet, he cannot properly endorse such a solution. For (positive) free logics rejects the entailment from sentences of the form “*Fa*” or “*Rab*” such as the above to sentences of the form “ $\exists x Fx$ ”. However, Crane wants to preserve that entailment, at least in the relevant cases. For him any of the above sentences - e.g. “Holmes is a fictional character” - legitimates an inference to a corresponding quantified sentence, e.g. “There is a fictional character”. As he says, “quantified sentences of the kind [here discussed] ... are best understood as generalizations from sentences which predicate something of their subjects” (p. 119). (To be sure, he admits that from “Leverrier thinks about Vulcan” one cannot validly infer “ $(\exists x)$  Leverrier is thinking about *x*”, just as a free logician would say (p. 56). However, it is not clear to me how he can admit that. For “Leverrier thinks about Vulcan” means the same as “Vulcan is an intentional object for Leverrier”, from which Crane should derive “ $(\exists x)$  (*x* is an intentional object for Leverrier)”). As a matter of fact, Crane seems to look for another solution. According to him, one can draw a distinction between *pleonastic* properties, i.e., properties whose possession amounts to being truly predicated of something (pp. 64, 70), and *substantial* properties, properties “that characterize the nature of real existing things” (p. 66). The above sentences mobilize just the first kind of properties. Thus, their true predication should involve no ontological commitment to what they are predicated of (p. 67). However, appealing to pleonastic properties does not work in this context. First of all, the distinction between pleonastic and substantial properties is, in Crane’s own lights, orthogonal to the distinction between items one is not ontologically committed to and items one is ontologically committed to. As Crane maintains, most pleonastic properties are representation-dependent properties, that is, they are properties whose true predication depends on the existence of some representation that mobilizes a suitable intentional content (p. 68). Yet, as Crane acknowledges (p. 69), even genuine entities can have such pleonastic properties. Certain real characters are talked about in fiction, Crane says: this is e.g. the case of Napoleon in *War and Peace* (p. 79). This entails that Napoleon is represented in *War and Peace* in a certain way; thus, he gets certain pleonastic properties, e.g. the property of being recalled far less than Countess Natasha in such a novel. Yet, this further means that being a pleonastic property is no mark of ontological decommitment. Moreover, appealing to pleonastic properties was not originally intended as a means to ontological decommitment. The idea of pleonastic entities was introduced in the philosophical literature by Schiffer (2003) and then reprised by Thomasson (2003), not in order to dispense with such entities, but rather to show how to be ontologically committed to those entities is a deflationary free lunch that does not weigh ontology down with metaphysically substantive entities.

At this point, in order to save the idea that both quantified sentences and singular sentences somehow involving nonexistent *intentionalia* are both true and ontologically noncommittal, Crane might appeal to a traditional strategy, *paraphraseism*. According to paraphraseism, any such sentence is both true and noncommittal for it means the same as another, overtly noncommittal, sentence. However, Crane puts this strategy aside (p. 120), probably also because of the well-known problem that, at least when non-referring singular terms are involved, no suitable paraphrase keeps the same modal content, hence the same truth-conditions, as the original sentence it allegedly paraphrases (Kripke 2013). Instead, as I said before, he prefers to appeal to *psychological reductionism*, according to which such sentences are true because their truth depends on more basic facts concerning genuine entities that make them true. In particular, such facts are representational facts. In order for such a sentence to be true, at least a certain representation having a certain

intentional content – typically individuated on the basis of a mental file nesting certain information about the relevant nonexistent *intentionale* (pp. 158-61) – must obtain (p. 133ff).

Clearly enough, although this reductionism is not an *ontological* reductionism, it is not a *nomological* reductionism either: it is not the case that truths about nonexistents have to be *deduced* from some more basic truths. So, perhaps this account provides necessary conditions in order for the relevant sentences to be true. Yet it does not provide sufficient conditions. Quite likely, we share the intuition that Leverrier and Twin-Leverrier postulated two different nonexistent *intentionalia* when they said that Vulcan is an orbit perturber. The first astronomer thought about the nonexistent Vulcan, the thing that, had it existed, would have perturbed Mercury's orbit, whereas utterly independently of the first, in his own galaxy the second astronomer thought about the different nonexistent *Twin-Vulcan*, the thing that, had it existed, would have perturbed *Twin-Mercury's* orbit. Nevertheless, they shared the same kind of Vulcan-representations with the very same intentional content; witness the fact that if the twins had unknowingly swapped their galactic positions, they would have gone on behaving in the very same way. Borges' Pierre Menard famous thought-experiment points towards a similar predicament: Cervantes and Menard respectively mobilize two distinct fictional nonexistent Don Quixotes, yet they share the same kind of representational facts. Given his both internalist and non-descriptivist approach to intentional content that his appeal to mental files displays, Crane has to allow such an unpleasant consequence.

Perhaps Crane might reply that such cases merely show that the same kind of representational facts make true different sentences. Yet, surely enough, they weaken his idea of "assuming the idea of representation ... by assuming the idea of an object of thought" (p. 41). For such an assumption entails that appealing to *different* (nonexistent) *intentionalia* serves to identify *different* thoughts hence *different* representational structures, as Crane explicitly maintained in his earlier (2001). Moreover, the above cases certainly shake his claim that similarity of representations prompts 'sameness' of nonexistent *intentionalia* (p. 163). For to repeat, in such cases the involved representations are clearly similar, yet the nonexistent *intentionalia* are surely 'different'.

All in all, I wonder whether Crane's intermediate course between the Scylla of Meinongianism and the Charybdis of realism is really viable. There is another path, however, that Crane has not yet investigated. Clearly enough, there is a phenomenological sense in which all the above sentences are true. *Within the scope* of what appears to the thinker, it is clearly true both (a) that there are certain nonexistent objects of thought, such as e.g. Holmes and Vulcan, and (b) that those *intentionalia* have certain properties, those that are predicated of them in the above singular sentences, even though it turns out that we cannot be ontologically committed to them. Thus, Crane might say that although it is not *really* true that there are nonexistent *intentionalia* etc. (for what is really true for him, as we have seen, is that there are *no* such objects), those things are *phenomenologically* true. Along such lines, he might even say that those phenomenological truths also convey real truths (in some pragmatic sense to be better specified). Everett (2013) has performed a similar move by saying that sentences of the above kind are *fictionally* true, so that they also convey real truths. To be sure, I am skeptical as to whether Everett's move is really satisfactory. Yet, clearly enough, the two moves, the phenomenological and the fictionalist one, though similar, are not identical. For, as Crane acknowledges from the very beginning of his book, some cases of nonexistent *intentionalia*, the 'error'-cases, involve no fiction at all. So, the phenomenological move

may cover cases that the fictionalist move leaves open. Hence, such a phenomenological strategy is definitely worth pursuing.

### *References*

- Crane, T. (2001), *Elements of Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Everett, A. (2013), *The Nonexistent*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Kripke, S. (2013), *Reference and Existence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Schiffer, S. (2003), *The Things We Mean*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Thomasson, A.L. (2003), "Fictional Characters and Literary Practices", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, 138-157.
- Voltolini, A. (2013), "There Are *Intentionalia* of Which It Is True That Such Objects Do Not Exist", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 21 (2013), 394-414.

*Alberro Voltolini*  
*Philosophy Department, University of Torino*